Using MOOC Camps to Teach English

by CLAIRE LEE

Have you ever taken a MOOC? MOOC is an acronym for "Massive Open Online Course." MOOCs are seen as a significant shift in the educational space because they equalize access to education: many of the courses are free and open to anyone, anywhere around the world. Although some courses require payment or are facilitated by instructors and close at a specific time, other courses are self-paced, providing an unlimited number of students access to topics such as technology, engineering—and language learning.

MOOCs have grown since their start over a decade ago to more than 220 million students worldwide (Shah 2021). Popular platforms for MOOCs include Coursera, edX, and FutureLearn. The Online Professional English Network (OPEN), a program sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, offers MOOCs for English language learning and teacher professional development.

How can we, as English language professionals, utilize these courses? One way is to facilitate what is called a MOOC camp. As an English Language Fellow, I facilitated MOOC camps with English learners from Japan. In this article, I share my experience and offer suggestions on how you can conduct a successful MOOC camp. For the purpose of this article and for the examples of the MOOC camps described below, I used MOOCs hosted on the Canvas Learning Management System through the OPEN program.

What are MOOC camps?

MOOC camps are synchronous meetings, in person or virtual, that support learners in completing a MOOC. They allow MOOC

camp participants to engage with others who are taking the course and deepen their learning. One study shows that the average completion rate for MOOCs is less than 20 percent (Kizilcec et al. 2020). There are many reasons for this low completion rate, including a lack of technical competency, motivation, and time-management skills. One way to help improve that percentage is through MOOC camps.

Why facilitate MOOC camps?

One of the great benefits of MOOCs is that they are (almost all) free. In these cases, participants do not need to pay to learn, although some "free" MOOC platforms require participants to pay a small fee to receive a certificate. Another benefit is that MOOC camps can be facilitated in countries with difficulty accessing technology or the internet. They can be held in a location like a library with internet so that participants can learn together. MOOCs hosted by OPEN are completely accessible online, and participants can download the content and learn offline. Finally, while the quality of MOOCs varies, many of them, including the OPEN MOOCs,

are created by top universities and institutions around the world.

How long is a MOOC camp?

The length of the camp depends on the length of the MOOC. Many MOOCs will give you a suggested timeline for completion. For example, OPEN MOOCs are five weeks long, and my MOOC camp was seven weeks long—with an additional meeting for orientation at the beginning and a meeting for celebration at the end. Figure 1 shows a sample schedule for the seven weeks.

How do I conduct a MOOC camp?

1. *Select a course.* The first step is to select a MOOC course that would be of interest to an audience you have in mind. In my case, I was asked to conduct MOOC camps for two OPEN courses: "English for Business and Entrepreneurship" and "English for Journalism" (OPEN 2023). These courses are for entrepreneurs and journalists who are interested in learning English to further their careers. But there are thousands of MOOCs with which you can facilitate a MOOC camp.

	Date and time	What participants are expected to do **before** the meeting
Orientation	Saturday, May 6, for 1 hour	Nothing required
Module 1	Saturday, May 13, for 2 hours	Complete activities from Module 1
Module 2	Saturday, May 20, for 2 hours	Complete activities from Module 2
Module 3	Saturday, May 27, for 2 hours	Complete activities from Module 3
Module 4	Saturday, June 3, for 2 hours	Complete activities from Module 4
Module 5	Saturday, June 10, for 2 hours	Complete activities from Module 5
Celebration of Learning	Saturday, June 17, for 1 hour	Email me a screenshot showing they have completed the MOOC

Figure 1. Sample schedule for a seven-week MOOC camp

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For example, OPEN also offers courses such as "English for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)," "English for Tourism Professionals," and "English for Media Literacy." You can use any MOOC such as "Improve Your English Communication Skills" (Coursera) and "Academic English: How to Write an Essay" (edX). When selecting a course, verify that it will be open during the time that you plan to hold your MOOC camp so that your participants will be able to enroll and complete it.

2. *Recruit participants*. You need to find participants who would like to complete the MOOC. This step may come first if you have a specific group of students in mind—for example, a class you teach. Because I was asked to facilitate specific courses, the audience had already been selected. If you don't already have a group of participants, you can gather a group of students by creating a flyer with information about the MOOC camp and sharing it with other teachers at your school. Students of any age can participate in a MOOC; it is important, though, to let them know the required level of English listed by the MOOC.

3. *Find times and a meeting place*. Because I conducted these camps during the peak of COVID, my MOOC camp was virtual, but you can hold in-person meetings at a convenient location for participants, such as in a classroom at your school. I held my camp meetings on Zoom each week on a Saturday, usually for two hours. Remember that the goal is to have the participants meet together to study and ideally to complete the course, so keeping their schedules in mind, and making the meeting time

and location as convenient for them as possible, are crucial.

4. *Familiarize yourself with the content of the MOOC*. MOOCs are often organized into modules, sections, or weeks. The MOOCs from OPEN consist of five modules in total, with a suggested participant workload of three to five hours per module and about one week recommended for each module. This means that the MOOCs take around 20 hours to complete, though some participants may require more or less time. You can conduct a MOOC camp for a course that you have already completed, or you can review the MOOC yourself before the camp. You can also complete the course alongside the participants, but I would recommend staying ahead so you can plan each meeting thoughtfully.

5. *Find guest speakers (optional but recommended)*. Although this is an optional component of a MOOC camp, having guest speakers was one of the best parts of the camps that I facilitated. While I am not an expert in the fields of journalism or business, these courses were introductory, so I felt I could facilitate them; however, I wanted expert voices as well. I reached out to alumni from my undergraduate university to find journalists and entrepreneurs who were willing to speak for 30 minutes or so to my students about their work. Other ways to find guest speakers include contacting local universities that have a department related to the topic of the MOOC. For example, if you are conducting a MOOC on "English for STEM," you can see if any science- or

technology-focused universities are located nearby. Check the university's website and see if you can find any professors in the field and, if possible, contact them by email. In my emails, I explained what I was doing and why I was contacting them, and I made my request. Here is a sample email:

Dear Professor XX,

My name is Claire, and I am an English teacher at (school) in (location). I am facilitating a course on "English for Journalism." My students are a group of 15 Japanese women journalists in Okinawa.

I am reaching out to you to see if you would be willing to speak to my students for approximately 30 minutes about your work as a journalism professor. I think it would be particularly helpful if you could speak briefly about (topic).

Please let me know if you are interested in speaking with my students and available on either (date) or (date) at (time of meeting). I know it would be an enriching experience for them. Thank you for your time and consideration!

Again, in my case, I had little difficulty finding English-speaking guests for the MOOC camps, as they were held virtually, and my contacts were in the United States, as I was. If you are conducting a MOOC camp in your region and cannot find English-speaking guest speakers, you might consider inviting guest speakers who do not speak English to share insights into their profession and/or to share how proficiency in English might help the participants in their careers.

6. *Facilitate the camp.* As mentioned above, my MOOC camps ran for seven weeks. I held an orientation meeting on the first day to help the participants sign up for the MOOC and to give them guidelines on what to expect from the MOOC camp. Then, each week, I asked participants to complete the activities and watch the videos for one module on their own before the camp meeting. If participants are finding it challenging to complete the work on their own, use the time together during the camp to help them complete the work. Keep in mind that the purpose of the camp is to support participants with the MOOC.

In addition to having guest speakers, I had participants play vocabulary-review games, join breakout-room (small-group) discussions, and engage in activities that helped them put what they had learned into practice. For instance, I asked participants to write and perform a one-minute elevator pitch using the structure shared in the "English for Business and Entrepreneurship" MOOC. If time allowed, I usually ended each meeting by previewing the next module.

Here is a sample overview and agenda for Module 4 of the "English for Business and Entrepreneurship" MOOC camp:

- **Icebreaker** (5 minutes): Have participants form small groups and share their names and their work, then answer a fun question like,

"Would you rather live by the beach or in the mountains?"

- **Vocabulary review** (10 minutes): Play a game on Quizlet using the vocabulary from Module 4.

- **Rewatch videos or answer discussion questions** (20 minutes): Give participants a chance to decide either to rewatch videos from Module 4 or to answer discussion questions related to the module. For example, they can answer the following questions: "What do you remember is part of an elevator pitch? … What do you think will be easy and challenging about giving an elevator pitch? … Have you done one before?"

- **Extension activity** (30 minutes): Participants write and practice giving a one-minute elevator pitch using the structure shared in Module 4.

- **Guest speaker** (30 minutes): A current CEO and founder of a company shares her business pitch and tips for giving a pitch to potential investors. I like to allow five to ten minutes for questions.

- **Preview of the next module** (20 minutes): Participants watch the first video from Module 5 and do the first activity together.

7. *Stay engaged with participants.* Throughout the week, I sent messages to participants to encourage them to work on the MOOC and give them reminders about our next meeting. I used a messaging app; you can use a Facebook group, WhatsApp, or another platform that your students feel comfortable with.

8. *Host a Celebration of Learning!* In the final week, I led a review of the entire MOOC and reminded students of what they had completed during the MOOC camp. I also asked the guest speakers to send a 30-second video congratulating the participants. Finally, I asked participants to complete a feedback form for the camp. You may also choose to create a certificate of completion of the MOOC camp, which might be an incentive for learners to join your camp.

These are a few ideas for facilitating a MOOC camp. You may have ideas of your own or modifications to these ideas that you can use, too. MOOC camps are an excellent way to utilize the already existing content and curriculum on the internet. For more information about OPEN MOOCs, using MOOCs in your lessons, and facilitating MOOC camps, check out https://americanenglish.state.gov/OPEN-MOOCs.

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